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THE CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY

A PASTORAL LETTER BY HIS EMINENCE
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A Pastoral Letter
by His Eminence,
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"It is, therefore, a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins."—II Machabees XII, 46.

The thought of death strikes at the very core of the human heart. The soul is immortal and the body was originally destined by the Almighty to be its inseparable companion. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that the thought of the separation of the soul from the body, as a result of man's guilty interference with the Divine plan, should perturb the innermost fibers of the heart.

If the grave were to end everything, man's plight would be more pitiable than the dull fate of the brute creature. The mineral world cannot feel; the animal kingdom has no spiritual elements impelling it to conquer matter and to outlive it. Man alone feels the necessity of an unending life of love. For those who rely upon the fancies of sceptics or disgruntled failures, for those who blindly follow the sweeping denials of materialists,

death, indeed, is an appalling disaster. For them it mercilessly tears apart the friendships of the world which are the most binding and sacred. For them it annuls the necessity of family and civic life with its attending props of law and order, of reward and punishment. But, for the reasoning man, the Christian of firm belief, whose conception of death is the beginning of life unending, based upon the victory of Christ's Resurrection, the thought of the departure from this earth is soothed with hope and encouragement.

True enough, death still retains some of its sadness for the believer in immortality because it places a temporary barrier between beloved ones. But the belief that, although we no longer hear the familiar voices, nor see the welcome countenances of our brethren, there exists a bridge over the chasm of death, consoles the heart and appeases the mind instead of stifling all hope merely because their dead bodies have been committed to the earth.

The Lot of Those Who Have Gone Before Us.

Search where we will, no greater consolation can answer the throbbing desires of humanity than that which comes to us from the doctrine of the Catholic Church with regard to Purgatory and the Communion of Saints.

Indeed, even the most benevolent teaching of unbelievers plunges us into freezing theories of despair concerning the lost of those who have gone before us into the vague beyond. They misunderstand one of the most consoling doctrines of the Church of Christ. They cannot explain, therefore, the great mystery of the future life; namely,—where do the souls of the just go to purge themselves of their imperfections which render them unworthy of immediate union with God? Surely, the souls of the just are not lost forever. If so,—where is the justice of God? Can they enjoy at once the perfect vision of God face to face while still bearing the stains of human imperfections? If so,—where is the sanctity of God?

There is no solution to this dilemma unless we accept the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, wherein all those who depart from this life with God's grace not entirely free from venial sins, or from what remained of temporal punishment due to grievous sin, must be cleansed and purified before they can reach the portals of Heaven. The Church knows this doctrine to rest on such reasonable grounds that she will not allow her children to mourn hopelessly the loss of their loved ones, but bids them take fondly to their hearts the consoling doctrine of Purgatory.

This belief is thoroughly scriptural. The Old Testament describes the Jewish custom of praying for the departed ones, who, it was hoped, were not lost forever. When Judas Machabeus, the leader of the Jewish armies, had triumphantly met the attacks of his enemies, the first thought which came to his mind was of the valiant warriors who had fallen in the field of battle,—"And making a gathering he sent twelve thousand drachms of

silver to Jerusalem for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection (for if he had not hoped that they that were slain should rise again, it would have seemed superfluous and vain to pray for the dead,) and because he considered that they who had fallen asleep with godliness, had great grace laid up for them. It is, therefore, a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins." (II Machabees XII, 43-46). This Jewish custom which endures even to this day is but a plain and natural outcome of the entire system of religion given by God to man. Notwithstanding the fact that the soldiers of Judas "had fallen asleep with godliness," a sacrifice was offered up for the remission of their sins.

Proclaims Absolute Sanctity of God

Holy Writ is too clear in the matter of the eternal punishment of those who die in enmity with God. Of such there was no question in the thought

of Judas Machabeus. On the other hand, the Book of God from its very beginnings proclaims incessantly the absolute sanctity of God in whose presence even the just, as Moses, were not allowed to appear, much less men guilty of even smaller offenses. The holiness of God is of itself the very opposition of the shadow of iniquity. The God of the heavens above is all beauty and light. How then could the darkness of sin penetrate into the heavenly mansion of His glory where "nothing defiled can enter?" (Apoc. XXI, 27). The conclusion is evident: Either the soul departing from this life must already be pure as the truest drop of gold or else must pass through some period of probation and of purgation before the vision of God is ultimately attained.

This sublime belief is preached in the parables and teachings of Christ. Our Lord, in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, speaks of the prison from which no one can find freedom until the last farthing be paid. Thus also

our Divine Master declares that, "Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but he that shall speak against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in the world to come." (Matt. XII, 32). What more convincing words could have been uttered by the Son of God with regard to the possibility of remitting sins even after death? "For," explains Saint Augustine, "to say that some sinners are not forgiven either in this world or in the next would not be true unless there were other sinners, who, although not forgiven in this world, will be forgiven in the world to come."

Indeed, Christ with His sympathetic insight, with His knowledge penetrating to the very depth of our being, knew how few there were who would be worthy of direct and immediate possession of His holy kingdom. He foresaw what any observant person can see with regard to the attitude of men towards their eternal destiny. Few are spotless; many are

great sinners whose hardened ways lead to the realms of eternal punishment; and above all, there are myriads whose guilt has been forgiven but whose punishment has not yet atoned for their imperfections and frailties. It is to these that the merciful heart of Christ referred when He reassured us that some sinners could find hope for the remission of their imperfections after death; except those who had sinned against the Holy Ghost.

Drawn From Very Words of God Himself

Clearly, therefore, the Church's doctrine with regard to Purgatory is drawn from the very words of God Himself. In them all mankind should find strength and consolation. They are so consonant with the yearnings of all humanity that many of our separated brethren have found their way back to the true fold because of this Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, and in so doing they returned to the Faith of their fathers among whom prayers

and Masses for the dead were a very live part of that Faith and conviction.

All the doctrines of the Catholic Church can easily be traced to the Apostles, through the monumental works of their learned successors. Even from the very first centuries the practice of praying for the dead, indicating a firm belief that the departed ones were in some place or state of probation, is clearly found in the Liturgy of the Universal Church. Just as today Catholics pray for the suffering souls and address supplications to God in their behalf, so in the days of the catacombs the early Christians inscribed on the tombs of the faithful, words of hope and petitions for peaceful rest in the Lord. The anniversaries of the faithful departed were remembered and the underground passages then sounded with the pious intercessions: "May you live in the Lord and pray for us." "May refreshment be granted to thee." This faith is none other than that which has come down to us through all the centuries.

How close to the beliefs of the disciples of Christ are our own when we read their literary testaments. There is no difference in thought between the theological treatises of our day and the works of the Fathers of the fourth century writing for their contemporaries that which they had received from their forefathers and ultimately from the Apostles. "We pray," writes St. Cyril of Jerusalem, "for the Holy Fathers and Bishops that are dead; and in short for all those who have departed this life in our communion; believing that the souls of those for whom prayers are offered receive very great relief while this Holy and tremendous Victim lies upon the altar."

Suffer Until Purging Process Purifies Them

The great doctor of the Oriental Church, St. Ephrem, at the very beginning of the fourth century was so convinced of the existence of an intermediate state of expiation that he begged of his brethren, "to make a remembrance of him on the thirtieth

day after his death; for, through the offerings of the living the dead are helped." And again, speaking of the customs of the very earliest Christian days, Tertullian said, "On the day of anniversary we make oblations for the dead," and he wishes to strengthen the position of the early believers by calling upon the example of their forefathers.

If at times the Fathers of the Church were obscure in their explanation of various doctrines of Christianity in an effort to avoid undue persecution, certainly in this matter of the sufferings after death of those who were not entirely cleansed, they were unanimously and fearlessly clear. For instance, St. Augustine mentions the necessity of the prayers of the Church for the assistance of the dead with the clear statement, "This custom has been received from the Fathers and it is observed by the Universal Church." So patent is this belief throughout the whole early Church, based on the apostolic custom and scriptural evidence, that not one

of the many enemies of the Church has ever been able to find any contradictory doctrine in all the early literature.

With the Catholic Church we are forced to admit the logical conclusion that besides a place of eternal torment destined for those who die as unrepentant enemies of God, and Heaven with its everlasting happiness for the entirely holy, there exists a place where those who die not enemies of God but, nevertheless, not perfectly stainless, suffer for a time until the purging process has purified them of all dross when finally they are ready to enjoy the beatific vision for all eternity.

The Church further clarifies this doctrine by describing the sufferings of these pure souls, and in this relation she speaks to us of the pain of loss.

Soul Created for Possession of Supreme Good

The human soul is created by Almighty God for the possession of the supreme good which is God Himself.

Man was given abundant means on all sides, means supernatural as well as natural. This all was according to a plan which established a perfect order between man and God. So long as this order remains undisturbed happiness and peace are sure to follow. The disturbance of this order means disaster and utter ruin of all happiness.

For us on earth, who have not seen God face to face, His Infinite beauty cannot be clearly understood, but the soul, once free from the body, glimpsing for even an instant the resplendent beauty of its Creator and Father, when deprived of that inestimable boon can never be happy again until it returns to gaze upon the brilliant glory of Heaven and the holiness of God.

Their momentary vision of all goodness and all purity makes them doubly conscious of their own stains and defects. And so, not daring to lift their eyes again to the splendor of God's glory they turn almost gladly to the place which His mercy has

assigned to them for that space of time which will in the end cleanse them from all stains, and at the end of which they rush out of their prison house towards the gates of Paradise.

The Church is always very cautious in speaking of other sufferings besides the pain of loss during the time of probation. It is, undoubtedly, the general sentiment of writers upon this subject that the soul undergoes some sort of affliction by fire. However acute though such sufferings may be they can never be compared with the pain which the soul undergoes by even momentary banishment from the sight of God.

The Consoling Doctrine of The Church

So, it is clear from all the teachings of the Church that the souls in Purgatory suffer and that their sufferings will only end when the soul is purified of all dross and stain of sin and demerit. And these good, holy souls would not have it otherwise. They love God now too well. They understand now the infinitude of His

holiness too clearly to desire to sit in His presence as a leper would before a king; but they are thoroughly and entirely willing to wait for the happy day when completely clean in the vision of God they may partake of His wonderful glory and participate in the light of His infinite holiness.

The consoling doctrine of the Church with regard to these holy but unhappy souls is this: That while of themselves they must await the completion of their just sentence, the all merciful God, by His wonderful law of charity, has placed in the hands of those still living the power to hasten the day of their liberation and of their flight to Paradise. What a privilege! What a duty is involved in this consoling doctrine! A privilege because it is given us to help the friends of God; our friends, too, to shorten the time of their painful probation. A duty, too, because when the all merciful Father places in our hands something of his own power for the benefit of others it is nothing short of cruelty not to use it in the way in

which He has intended, namely, to hasten the day when these souls, whom He loves and who are for a moment far from Him, will enter at last His celestial court; and with the Angels and Archangels and all the Saints of Paradise sing the never ending chorus of His glory, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts!" (Isaias, VI, 3).

Therefore, no Christian may shirk his duty of charity towards the souls in Purgatory without himself incurring serious blame. The Church of Christ is one family whose head is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and whose members are all related to one another and all interdependent to some degree one on the other. The blessed in Heaven, the souls in Purgatory and we poor mortals are all of that most united family.

Constitute a Wonderful Circle of Love and Tenderness

The Saints in Paradise look down upon us with love and help us in our way, rough as it always is, towards our place with them in Heaven. We,

too, mindful of our brothers and sisters still deprived of God's vision by some venial stains which yet they carry, must help them as we hope to be helped by them when after their brief sojourn in Purgatory they climb the ladder which leads straight to God and eternal happiness.

And so, the Saints in Heaven, the suffering souls in Purgatory and we strugglers and poor sinners of earth, constitute a wonderful circle of love and tenderness which builds up around us all, the most perfect and beautiful unity of God's eternal charity towards His poor, weak children.

The month of November the Church dedicates and consecrates to the memory of the suffering souls of Purgatory; not that our love for the suffering members of our great family should be confined to this month alone, but because by allotting this time to the purpose of realizing our duties towards our suffering brethren we shall be encouraged to practice every devotion which Holy Mother Church places in our hands for their

benefit and their relief. Alas, we forget so easily, even at times, our most sacred obligations and our tenderest ties. Is it anything short of a crime that a son should forget his father or a daughter her mother, once death has claimed them and taken them out of their sight? Surely, there is nothing tender and beautiful in such oblivion. Is there nothing harsh in the fact that a friend is forgotten as soon as the earth covers his mortal body? Thank God, in His Church such apathy and thoughtlessness have no place in her ministrations and her lessons to her children. No,—she follows them beyond the tomb and taking her children still living here below by the hand, she teaches them to tread softly upon the earth 'neath which they lie, to kneel reverently above their graves and to look up to Him as they are looking up to Him, and pray for the day when God's justice shall be completely requited and His loving children at His side forever. This is what is meant by helping the souls in Purgatory.

Listen With Affection to the Cry That Comes to You

How consoling, how salutary, how helpful not only to those who have gone before us but to ourselves left behind, but soon,—oh, so soon, to follow after them through the gates of death before the judgment throne, and then by God's mercy to join those who from sheer love of God are willing and happy to suffer and to wait the day of eternal freedom.

Beloved children in Christ, forget not your dear dead. In the feverish activities and endless cares and engrossing occupations of your busy lives, listen, listen with affection to the cry that comes to you, "Oh, at least you my friends have pity on me, for the hand of God hath touched me; pray for me that soon and forever I may behold God in all His holiness, in all His tender love."

St. Monica at the point of death said to her saintly son, the great Augustine, "Son, beloved Son, bury me wherever you please; but remember me every day at the altar of the

Lord." There is no mother who does not repeat to her son these pathetic words of Monica to Augustine who wrote down in the clearest of language the strength of his faith when he said, "The prayers and alms of the faithful, the holy sacrifice of the altar aid the faithful departed and move the Lord to deal with them in mercy and kindness."

Every Catholic knows well his duty to those who have gone before him, who were his parents, his relatives, his friends. What hardness of heart, therefore, to forget selfishly all that has come to him through them in life. What ingratitude never to feel the debt which at least in small measure he can now pay by remembering them at the altar of God, in his prayers and in his good deeds offered in behalf of those he loved on earth, now suffering perhaps for the sins of which he himself was the occasion. Oh, this would be cold heartedness indeed, cruel not only to them but to himself. For, beloved children, do not forget that where now the faithful

departed are we shall one day be. If we fail to help them now, who will remember us in our sore and sorry need? If we are content to forget those we loved we should have no right to complain when we, too, are utterly and entirely forgotten.

Another Manifestation of God's Love

The doctrine of Purgatory is another manifestation of God's love for humanity, and of His great and tender mercy even for those who during life have offended Him but who, dying, at least came back to receive the pardon of His love.

The doctrine of Purgatory is not only sane and reasonable but most intelligible to all who understand anything of the spiritual life of the soul, of God's eternal justice and of His unspeakable mercy.

While during November Holy Mother Church reminds us of our duty toward those whom we loved and lost, she teaches us at the same time our duty towards ourselves. By her tenderness for the dead she extends that beautiful bond of charity

which unites the Church Suffering and the Church Militant, both to the Church Triumphant.

Let, therefore, this holy month of November, dedicated to the poor, suffering souls, be observed by all of us with the tenderest feelings of devotion. Let us kneel again above the graves of our loved ones. Let us take our prayers and our good deeds which are far more pleasing in their sight now than the fairest flowers, and offer them to Almighty God as a pious memento of our affection to those we have lost. Above all, by our daily prayers, by our frequent holy Communions and by the Masses offered for their eternal repose, let us consecrate in deed and in truth this holy month to the peace and repose of all the suffering souls. still waiting for the happy day of release and eternal freedom with God. Again and again may the thought of them bring to our lips the touching prayer of the Church, "Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon them."